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Trade relations between Central Asia and Kashmir Himalayas during the Dogra period (1846-1947)

K. Warikoo

Notwithstanding the great mountain barriers of Hindu Kush, Karakoram, Kuen Lun and Western Himalayas, there existed overland trade links between India and Central Asia since ancient times which in turn exerted strong influence on the socio-economic developments in both the regions. The caravan traders acted as the medium of exchange of art, culture, ideas and technology thereby assisting in the process of urbanisation. So much so, many areas along the trade routes became famous for their specific products. For instance, Khotan was famed for jade, carpets and silken fabrics and hemp cords. Bukhara was noted for its carpets; Badakhshan for lapis-lazuli and rubies; Tibet for musk and pashm wool; Turfan for pashm wool and Kashmir for its saffron, fine shawls and calligraphed books. In short, these areas developed into important trading centres in this east-west trade which was carried through the « Silk Route ». Due to its geographical proximity to Central Asia and linkage with the Silk Routes system, Kashmir acted as an important transit emporium in the bilateral Indo-Central Asian trade. This paper seeks to analyse the extent and pattern of commercial exchanges that took place between India and the Central Asian region of Bukhara, Kokand, and

Turkestan (excluding Eastern Turkestan or Xinjiang region of China) through Kashmir and Ladakh during the Dogra rule, i.e. from 1846 till 1947 when India became independent and started a new phase of relations with Central Asia free of past colonial legacy.

Kashmir's trade connection with Central Asia was indirect as the two sides had no common border. Whatever commerce was conducted was through the circuitous and difficult mountainous trade routes which passed through Ladakh and Chinese Turkestan on the one side and Chitral and Pamirs on the other. Traders from Kashmir and Punjab hills would prefer to traverse the Srinagar-Leh-Yarkand-Kashghar-Kokand route for their trade and other dealings in Central Asia, mainly because it was safe from robberies and political turmoil. Such was the safety of this route that in the event of unfavourable weather or death of ponies, traders would march to a safe place leaving behind their goods which were fetched after the climate became favourable or substitute transport became available.¹ That is why wealthy Central Asian Kashghar pilgrims and merchants, who carried considerable amount of gold and silver preferred this route to that via Bukhara-Afghanistan-Punjab because the latter side was comparatively risky.² Those traders who conducted small business in Chitral, Gilgit, Hunza, Nagar, Skardu etc. thus bypassing Leh and the valley of Kashmir, used other mountainous tracks - Ferghana-Kashghar-Tashkurghan-Hunza-Gilgit, Bukhara-Kabul-Chitral-Peshawar, Ferghana-Pamirs-Chitral. As regards the volume of Indian trade with Central Asia via the above noted channels, it was considerably lesser in value than what passed through Punjab-Afghanistan-Central Asia or the Bombay-Batum sea routes.

With the Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia gaining intensity during the second half of nineteenth century and the imposition of curbs on Indian imports by the Russian authorities in Central Asia, the Kashmir-Kashghar-Kokand route was further relegated to a secondary position so far as Indian trade with Central Asia was concerned. But the fact remains that the overland trade routes between India and Central Asia were important channels of communication between the two sides before the discovery of sea routes.

Exports to Central Asia

The Caravan trade through Kashmir was handled by pedlars and trading agents either individually or collectively. Central Asian imports

comprised Indian tea, indigo, muslin, brocades, spices, indigenous medicines, Kashmir shawls, books, coral etc., which were quite popular among the people of Central Asia. But for the direct export of its shawl products and books to Central Asia, Kashmir's involvement in the Indo-Central Asian trade was limited to being a transit station for the transmission of Indian goods through the Leh-Yarkand route.

Shawls

Shawl, which signifies an intricately woven and embroidered dress material made of fine wool, continues to be one of the celebrities of Kashmir. Used as a body covering, scarf or a turban, the shawl formed the attire of the kings, queens and the nobility. Shawls were popular among the nobility and affluent sections of society in Europe and also in Central Asia. Till early twentieth century there existed a tradition among the Central Asian ruling nobility to present Kashmir shawls to an honoured guest or to any superior in rank and authority as the mark of esteem. Central Asia which maintained close commercial ties with Russia acted as a transit station in the forward transmission of Kashmir shawls to markets in Russia, Persia and Constantinople. Whereas Kashmiris went as far as Orenburg to trade their goods, merchants and trading agents from Central Asia, Persia etc., used to come personally to Kashmir for making on the spot purchases of shawl goods.³ An 'Abd al-Karim of Bukhara, who visited Kashmir twice during the late eighteenth century, was witness to several Kashmiri traders travelling from Kashmir to Ladakh to sell their packages of shawls in Central Asia.⁴ When Moorcroft visited Kashmir in 1820, he saw numerous merchants of Turkestan, Kabul and Persia getting shawl goods prepared in Kashmir in conformity with the requirements of their customers.⁵ According to Moorcroft the demand for shawls in Russia was great at that time and a big trading house in Yarkand had sent its representative to Kashmir for the sole purpose of purchasing shawls suited to the Russian market.⁶ It is also corroborated by Meyendorff who accompanied the Russian mission of De Negri to Bukhara in 1820. Meyendorff was informed by a Kashmiri trader in Bukhara that about 2000 Kashmir shawls were exported to Russia each year.⁷ Shawl trade of Kashmir was the chief attraction not only for Central Asian merchants but also for the Russian trading circles. This is evident from the despatch of a mission under Aghâ Mehdî Rafailov to Kashmir by the Russians (in 1808 and 1820) for exploring the possibility of establishing a free and regu-

lar commercial intercourse of Ladakh, Kashmir and Punjab with Central Asia and thence with Russia.⁸ That Aghâ Mehdî, who was an established shawl trader, actually imported several loads of dyes, mordants and samples of dyed woollen fabrics in several designs for introducing the same in Kashmir's shawl industry, points to the keen Russian interest in promoting the shawls trade.

Kashmir shawls used to be exported to Central Asia and therefrom to Russia mainly during the first half of the nineteenth century, after which such trade dropped in value considerably. Bukhara had developed into a main transit centre receiving shawls from the direction of Kabul and forwarding them for consumption in Russia. Such trading was further facilitated by the settlement of a large number of Kashmiri artisans and traders in Kabul, Peshawar, Lahore and Amritsar.

Burnes estimated that 120 to 300 pairs of Kashmir shawls made of finest texture were annually exported to Russia through Central Asia.⁹ Kashmiri embroiders are even reported to have been travelling long distances to Russia for assessing the actual requirements of their Russian customers and also to alter the designs of their shawl goods in accordance with the tastes of shawl buyers.¹⁰ Kashmir shawls reached the Central Asian markets through the Srinagar-Amritsar-Kabul route as well. According to an authoritative estimate, shawls worth 12,30,000 Indian rupees were annually exported from Kashmir to Amritsar.¹¹ According to another eye-witness account, the Bukhara authorities used Kashmir shawls in *khilat* and as presents to the foreign dignitaries and Russian authorities in Central Asia.¹² However, the export of Kashmir shawl goods to Central Asia and onwards to Russia declined considerably towards the end of nineteenth century. This was due to, firstly, Russian restrictions on Indian imports into Central Asia, secondly, extermination of khoja rule in Chinese Turkestan in 1877-1878 and restoration of Chinese authority and, thirdly, general decline in demand for Kashmir shawls in Europe after the introduction of manufactured imitations from British industries.

Tea

The people of Central Asia harboured a special liking for Indian tea, which explained the increasing export of this commodity from India to Central Asia via Punjab-Kabul-Bukhara and Kashmir-Kashghar-Kokand overland trade routes. A considerable portion of this trade

was later diverted to the Bombay-Batum sea route after the extension of Russian railways to Central Asia. There is sufficient ground to believe that a part of the tea exported to Chinese Turkestan from India found its way to Central Asia from Kashghar. When in the years 1887-1888 the Chinese authorities imposed severe restriction on the import of Indian tea for use within Sinkiang via Leh-Yarkand route, the traders from Central Asia came personally to Leh to purchase tea for consumption in their markets.¹³ This was because of the fact that the Chinese authorities in Sinkiang had imposed no such curbs on the Andijani traders if they imported Indian tea via Leh-Yarkand route but only for sale within Russian parts of Central Asia. During the year 1889-1890 Indian tea worth 37,500 rupees was imported into Chinese Turkestan from Leh, which was exclusively meant for Central Asia.¹⁴ The Chinese would detail a force to accompany such Central Asian traders carrying Indian tea up to the frontier at Irkishtam to ensure that no part from such consignments was sold in Chinese territory on the way.¹⁵ This trade soon assumed considerable proportions. In 1890 the Russian customs authorities at Osh collected a revenue of 30,000 rubles on account of the duty levied on Indian tea imported via the Kashmir-Kashghar route.¹⁶ The export of Indian tea to Central Asia via the Kashmir route declined to insignificant level towards the end of nineteenth century.

Indigo

Apart from its export to Central Asia via Kabul-Bukhara route, indigo found its way to Chinese Turkestan from India via Kashmir. A fraction of this dye was later re-exported to Russian Turkestan from Kashghar. Macartney, the British Consul at Kashghar, reported in early 1895 that a large quantity of indigo imported into Chinese Turkestan via Kashmir was being exported to Russian Turkestan via Osh.¹⁷ As per the data collected by the Russian Consulate at Kashghar 1500 rubles worth indigo and 1000 rubles worth aniline dye were exported to Russian Turkestan from Kashghar during the year 1915.¹⁸ Such exports of indigo to Russian Turkestan via long and indirect India-Kashghar route reached the high point of 52,500 rubles during the year 1916.¹⁹ But the import of indigo into Central Asia from India via Kashmir-Kashghar route remained far below the level of Indian exports of Indigo to Chinese Turkestan.

Coral

A steady and sizeable demand for coral ornaments among the Central Asian was responsible for increased export of the coral beads to Russian Turkestan from India via Ladakh and Chinese Turkestan. Though coral was equally popular amongst the people in Ladakh, Tibet and Chinese Turkestan, its export to Sinkiang registered a sharp increase only after the bilateral Russo-Sinkiang trade was put on a regular and firm footing as a result of the signing of St. Petersburg Treaty in 1881. This facilitated the export of coral to Chinese Turkestan from India for re-export to Central Asia. Since the Russian authorities had imposed a duty of 4 to 5 rubles per lb of coral imported into Russian Turkestan²⁰ as part of their policy to restrict Indian exports to that area, smuggling of coral into Ferghana through the mountain passes of Irkishtam and Osh flourished. About half of the total quantity of coral imported into Russian Turkestan was estimated to have been smuggled.²¹ As per the data available with the Russian Consulate in Kashghar about 40,000 rupees were collected by the Russian Customs House as duty on coral worth about 100,000 rupees exported to Russian Turkestan from Kashghar in the year 1901-1902.²² Similarly 21,600 rubles were collected as duty on this item of trade alone during the year 1904-1905.²³ In view of the high duties realised by the Russian Customs authorities and the consequent smuggling of coral into Russian Turkestan coral export to Central Asia from India via Kashghar was actually more than what was recorded at the Russian Consulate in Kashghar. Coral exports to Chinese Turkestan were unusually large in the years 1893 to 1908 after which an abrupt depression followed possibly due to increased supplies directly from Russia. Coral worth 23,16,949 Indian rupees was exported from India to Chinese Turkestan via Kashmir-Kashghar route during this period. It would be safe to assume that on an average half of the coral exported to Chinese Turkestan found its way to the markets in Central Asia. All such coral trade was entirely in the hands of British Indian traders who found it both profitable and easy to transport. This coral was imported from Italy into India from where it was re-exported to Central Asia. Despite such heavy odds as the restrictive duties imposed by the Tsarist government and the circuitous and hazardous nature of the Leh-Yarkand-Kashghar-Ferghana route, coral exports from India to Central Asia flourished for more than a quarter of century.

Indian imports from Central Asia via Kashmir

Indian traders who conducted their business with Central Asia found it lucrative to send their sale proceeds back to India in the form of gold coins and rubles. There was no other alternative product in Central Asia that could have been imported by these traders for resale in India. However, Russian made cotton goods, Bukharan and Kokandi silks also reached the markets of Ladakh and Kashmir.

Bukharan and Kokandi gold coins

Precious metals like silver ingots and coins, gold in dust and coins were traditional items of import into Kashmir from Chinese Turkestan. Several factors were responsible for such import. Firstly, the Central Asians had much less to offer in exchange for the manufactured goods exported there by the Indian traders who found it convenient to import bullion as one of the means of transferring their sale proceeds back to India. Secondly, the hazardous journey over the high altitude and tedious Leh-Yarkand route made it incumbent upon the traders to carry such goods as were light and easy transportable. Thirdly, the Central Asian Kashghar pilgrims who annually travelled through India *en route* to Mecca brought sufficient quantities of bullion for meeting their travel and other expenses. However, the quantum of gold imports into India via Ladakh and Kashmir varied in accordance with the nature of political and economic conditions prevailing in Central Asia from time to time. During the first half of the nineteenth century *tilla* (gold coins) of Bukhara and Kokand flowed into Ladakh and Kashmir almost regularly. But with the extension of Russian control over the Central Asian Khanates this trade was seriously disrupted.

Since the gold coins of Bukhara and Kokand were abundantly available in Kashgharia mainly due to the free movement of Kokandi, Andijani, Bukharan, Kashghari and Yarkandi traders throughout Central Asia, these were consequently imported into Ladakh from the direction of Yarkand. All such coins were sold as merchandise rather than used as coins. From 1883 onwards the import of gold coins and dust registered a sharp increase which was due to the arrival of Shikarpuri merchants from Bukhara and other Central Asian towns via Kashghar-Yarkand-Leh caravan route. These traders, whose money-lending activities had been strictly restricted by the Russian authorities in Central Asia, were forced by the changed conditions there to return to India.

So they brought their accumulated capital and profits earned during their long stay in Central Asia in the form of gold coins and dust. Due to such increased imports prices of gold fell in Kashmir.²⁴ This phenomenon continued till 1900 from which year onwards the Russian gold and paper rubles substituted the earlier form of bullion imports.

Russian Currency

Russian currency began to occupy an important place in the Indian imports from Chinese Turkestan towards the end of the nineteenth century. The tendency of Indian traders to transmit their earnings in Kashgharia to India in the Russian currency continued subject to minor fluctuations till 1919 when the British authorities in India prohibited such imports. Several factors like easy availability of Russian rubles in Chinese Turkestan due to increased earnings from Sinkiang's exports to Russia, the advantageous position held by rubles *vis-à-vis* the local Chinese currency in exchange value and the British Indian policy to restrict import of hemp drug into India by imposing high taxes on the same, were collectively responsible for the increased import of Russian rubles into India. The quantity and value of this import altered with the change in the overall trade climate brought in by any shift or alteration in any of the above noted operational factors.

The raw materials exported from Chinese Turkestan to Russia via Ferghana were paid back in Russian manufactured goods and rubles. Since Sinkiang's exports to Russia far exceeded the imports from that end, the balance was met by ruble payments. As a result of the conclusion of the St. Petersburg Treaty in 1881, the Russo-Sinkiang trade scaled new heights thereby ensuring a regular and abundant supply of Russian rubles in the markets of Kashgharia.

The year 1897 appears to have been a cut-off point when the Russian currency began to be imported into India as a trade commodity. During that year rubles worth about 85,000 rupees were remitted to Bombay from Kashghar.²⁵ But for the temporary periods of depression such import went on rising in value till it scaled the new heights of about six million rubles in the year 1919-1920.²⁶

Then came a sudden halt to this trading in Russian gold and paper currency as a result of the British prohibition imposed on any ruble imports into India as part of their anti-Bolshevik campaign. Even the possession of the ruble by any Indian would invite punishment. In the beginning only the Russian gold rubles were in demand with the Indian

traders who sold them to the jewellers for making gold ornaments. During the period from 1901 to 1916 such gold coins were imported in considerable quantities through the Yarkand-Leh caravan trade route. Besides, the Central Asian pilgrims desirous of making a *hāj* pilgrimage through India brought in sufficient quantities of gold coins to meet their expenses, thus ensuring a regular supply of Russian bullion to the Indian market. But when the Russian government introduced effective measures to encourage dealings in paper rubles and to check the outflow of gold currency, the Indian traders operating in Kashgharia found themselves lured by the facilities offered. At least four lakh of rupees worth rubles were delivered by the Indian traders to the Russo-Asiatic Bank and the Russian Post Office at Kashghar during the year 1910-1911, for remittances to India by drafts or money orders.²⁷ Though no official estimate of the actual value of paper rubles imported through these channels is available, it is certain that the import of Russian currency into India far exceeded the estimates as shown in the annual Ladakh Trade Reports. An idea of this trade can be had by the fact that about 3 million rubles were deposited in the government treasuries at Srinagar and Leh in a short period of the first three months of the year 1920.²⁸ Russian rubles worth 80,00,000 Indian rupees were imported into India from Chinese Turkestan through Kashmir during the period 1897 to 1919. This trade dropped to the lowest point in 1920 as a result of the British prohibition on such trading. The British feared that Russian rubles could be used in fomenting anti-British agitation in India. However, these ruble imports into India were a result of the depression in the export trade of Chinese Turkestan which did not possess the capacity to supply alternative goods to India. The ruble trade was in no way a part of any direct trade dealings between India and Central Asia.

Silk Cloth

Fine silk cloth made in Bukhara, Kokand and Andijan reached Ladakh, though in small quantities, through its trade route with Chinese Turkestan. Among such silk imports may be listed soft thin silken handkerchiefs known as *rumal* produced in Bukhara, *darua*, a mixture of cloth and silk in various coloured designs and *shahi*, fine silk cloth both made in Kokand and Russian made silks like *zarbaf-i-kalab* (imitation brocades), silk velvets and satin. There was a spurt in the value of such imports from Yarkand during and after the year 1883. This

was due to the fact that Kokandi and Andijani traders coming to Ladakh to buy Indian tea for consumption within Central Asia brought along with large quantities of silk cloth for sale. Thus 1374 pieces of *shahi* silk worth 6,870 rupees were brought into Leh during the year 1883²⁹ as against worth 790 rupees only in the previous year.³⁰ However, import of this commodity declined in value from 1890 onwards. As against such small imports of Central Asian silk cloth into Kashmir, Indian silk goods like brocades, velvet, satin etc. used to be exported to Chinese Turkestan and thence to Central Asia in greater quantities. The import of Bukharan and Kokandi silks into Ladakh and Kashmir was not only insignificant in value but also irregular and fluctuating. Such import was only due to the Kokandi and Andijani traders and pilgrims who brought this commodity for sale in Ladakh during their personal visits to that quarter.

It is worthwhile to record here that in 1881 a small quantity of ten seers of silkworm eggs valuing 1600 Indian rupees reached Kashmir through the traditional Yarkand-Ladak trade route for use in the valley. The extensive damage to the Kashmir silk industry as a result of the spread of the silkworm disease in 1878 must have induced some enterprising Kashmiri trader to import silkworm eggs from Yarkand where these were abundantly available due to large supplies that came from Central Asia. A few years later in early 1890, five seers of Bukharan silkworm eggs of high quality were imported into Kashmir through the medium of Government of India and the British Agent in Kabul, Lt. Col. 'Atâ Allâh Khân. Though such import was too small in quantitative terms, it was sufficient for introducing high grade Bukharan silk in the Kashmir filatures.

Since the territories of Central Asia and Kashmir were not coterminous, no direct trade was possible between the two regions. Whatever commerce was transacted was through Punjab, Afghanistan or Chinese Turkestan via difficult and circuitous Srinagar-Punjab-Afghanistan-Bukhara and Leh-Yarkand-Kashghar-Kokand routes. Due to such geographical factors this trade was subjected to numerous inhibiting influences like the state of unstable political conditions in the Central Asian Khanates and the hazardous nature of the mountainous trade routes. This trade was just an extension of the traditional and well established Kashmir-Kashghar trade. It also came under the influence of the overland Russo-Kashghar trade. This was particularly so when the

influx of Russian gold and paper rubles into Chinese Turkestan increased and when the Shikarpuri traders in Central Asia returned to India via Kashghar carrying with them their earnings in the form of gold after the Russian authorities imposed restrictions on their business activities. The Indo-Central Asian trade became the casualty of the Anglo-Russian rivalry over Central Asia. The British success in adopting various measures in Kashmir for promoting Indian trade with Chinese Turkestan was undone by the steps taken by the Tsarist administration for keeping British goods away from the Central Asian markets. Under such circumstances there existed only small trade dealings between Kashmir and Central Asia particularly in indigenous products of India like spices, tea, indigo, books, shawls, brocades etc. which maintained steady demand among the Central Asians and the occasional import of Russian currency. The disturbed conditions in Central Asia in the period soon after the Bolshevik revolution adversely affected the movement of trade between Central Asia and Kashmir, which was already irregular and insignificant. With the state take-over of private trade in former Soviet Russia, little scope was left for Indian trade with former Soviet Central Asia, which was solely operated through the medium of private traders. The restrictions imposed by the British on exports of essential commodities like cloth, leather etc. from India to Central Asia during the height of Anglo-Soviet tensions, also inhibited the development of this trade. In short, whatever little commercial connection existed between Central Asia and Kashmir dwindled to a small trickle in the wake of October revolution in Russia. These relations, however, were revived on a national plane after India gained independence.

NOTES

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2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, p. 62; G. Forster, *A journey from Bengal to England*, London, 1798. Vol. 2. p. 20.
4. Charles Schefer, ed. and tr., *Histoire de l'Asie Centrale par Mir Abdoul Karim Boukhary*, Paris, 1876, p. 223.
5. Moorcroft to G. Swinton, 12 November, 1822. See *Foreign Political*, 10 October 1823, 29 (National Archives of India).

6. *Ibid.*
7. Cited in David N. Druhe, *Russo-Indian Relations, 1466-1917*, New York, 1977, p. 102.
8. For further details on Aghâ Mehdî's mission see K. Warikoo, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-13.
9. A. Burnes, *Travels into Bokhara (1831-1833)*, London, 1835. Vol. 2. p. 435.
10. *Ibid.*
11. R. H. Davies, *Report on the Trade and Resources of the Countries on the North Western Boundary of British India*, Lahore, 1862, p. 72.
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13. *Ladakh Trade Report*, 1888-1889.
14. *Ladakh Trade report*, 1889-1890.
15. *Note on Leh Trade Report, 1893-1894*, by Macartney dated 16 March 1895 (National Archives of India).
16. Macartney to N. Elias dated Kashghar 8 February 1891. See *Foreign. Sec. F.* Sept. 1891. 176-77 (National Archives of India). *Turkestanskiye Vidomosti* 9 (21), 13 (25), 16 (28) October 1894.
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24. *Ladakh Trade Report for 1890-1891*.
25. *Report on Trade with Chinese Turkestan for 1897-98*, by Macartney.
26. *Ladakh Trade report for 1919-1920*.
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28. *Ladakh Trade Report for 1919-1920*.
29. *Ladakh Trade Report for 1883*.
30. *Ladakh Trade Report for 1882*.